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ABSTRACT

A survey of 71 rural Illinois school psychologists examined the frequency of their professional contacts, their level of computer knowledge, and their access to technology. Results indicate that although rural school psychologists serve an average of 1,620 students, practice in an average of 5.5 schools, and work for 2.2 school districts, professional isolation was less pronounced than expected. Two-thirds of the rural school psychologists had face-to-face contact with another school psychologist at least once a week, and half had at least weekly contact with a colleague over the phone or via computer. Most attended local or regional school psychology meetings and the spring convention of the Illinois School Psychologists Association (ISPA). Still, nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated a desire to have additional professional contacts with colleagues. The vast majority had access to a computer at work and at home. Respondents indicated that they possessed the basic computer skills of word processing, test scoring, sending and receiving e-mail, and report writing, but fewer than 20 percent were able to use a listserv, Power Point, or statistical programs. Two-thirds of respondents wanted to know more about using listservs, nearly half wanted to learn to use Power Point, and 40 percent wanted to know more about searching the Internet. Results suggest that local presentations or handouts in the ISPA newsletter would be the best way to provide rural school psychologists with the information they need and want about technology. (TD)

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Rural communities across the United States have had difficulty attracting and retaining school psychologists. Although shortages of these psychologists exist in urban and suburban areas as well, rural areas have been the hardest hit. Reasons for these shortages are many, but the challenges most unique to rural areas include extensive travel on poor roads, lack of appropriate resources for children with disabilities, and professional isolation (Jacob-Timm, 1995). With respect to the issue of professional isolation, several small rural districts often share the services of one school psychologist. Thus, there may not be another school psychologist within a fairly large geographical area. At best, such geographically isolated school psychologists may only see their counterparts at monthly district meetings or at annual meetings of professional associations. Geographical remoteness and increased job demands caused by personnel shortages (i.e., one person doing the work of two or more) may make it unusually difficult to take the time for even those few professional contacts.

The infrequent contact with professional colleagues intensifies the need for other resources. Rural school psychologists may be more in need of professional resources than their urban and suburban counterparts. Because there are generally fewer mental health resources in rural communities than elsewhere, school psychologists may need to function as the psychological equivalent of the old country doctor—knowing something about nearly every disorder and wielding a fair amount of influence in a community. According to Jerrell (1984), rural school psychologists need to adopt a "boundary-spanning" role in which they serve as representatives of the school district to the community and in which they facilitate the passing of information and resources to and from the schools. Jacob-Timm (1995) reinforced this perspective, adding that "when compared with their nonrural counterparts, rural school psychologists have reported greater influence on school policy, more time spent in consultation and less time devoted to assessment, and a greater emphasis on boundary-spanning functions (i.e., coordination of people and resources)" (p. 303).

Ideally, the use of computer technology could help reduce the professional isolation experienced by many rural school psychologists. Although this might not totally substitute for face-to-face contact with colleagues, it would enable school psychologists to feel professionally connected. Computer technology can also provide the means to keep up with professional literature on the wide variety of topics about which these professionals are expected to know.

The study reported here was conducted to gain a better understanding of school psychologists in rural Illinois. This report describes a sample of Illinois' rural school psychologists based on the results of a recent survey distributed throughout the state. It examines those psychologists' current level of professional contacts, as well as their level of computer knowledge and their access to technology.

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Method

A survey was developed to determine the professional resources, including technological resources, currently being used by school psychologists in rural areas. The first half of the survey contained questions covering whether the respondents considered themselves to be working in rural areas, their professional affiliations, professional meetings attended during 1999, number and type of contacts with other school psychologists, and whether respondents wished to have more professional contacts with colleagues.

The determination about what rural was was left to the respondent since definitions of "rural" vary considerably and it seemed reasonable to let respondents decide how they perceived their working conditions. Respondents were asked, "Do you consider yourself to be working in a rural area?" The possible responses were "yes," "no," and "unsure." Each of the surveys from those who marked unsure was examined and classified as rural or not based on three criteria: (1) the approximate size of the community served, (2) the proximity to urban or suburban areas, and (3) the responses from other school psychologists in the same area. All but two of the "unsure" surveys were then reclassified as either rural or urban. The remaining two were not used in the current study.

The second half of the survey asked questions related to the respondents' familiarity with computer technology. They were asked if they had access to a computer at work and at home, what computer skills they currently possess, whether they use computer technology as a resource when faced with an unfamiliar disorder or intervention technique, whether they collect professional accountability data using a computer, and whether they would like to increase their computer skills.

The survey was mailed to 640 school psychologists in Illinois. This number included all members of the Illinois School Psychologists Association (ISPA) outside the city of Chicago as well as alumni of Western Illinois University's (WIU) school psychology training program who were working in that position in Illinois. (These two lists were cross-checked to avoid duplicate mailings.) For all those outside of Chicago, it was difficult to determine from an individual's address just where that person was working. Sending surveys to ISPA members outside of Chicago and to WIU school psychology alumni working in Illinois does not represent a random selection process; however, the goal was to gather data from a large number of rural school psychologists in Illinois with the objective of ultimately providing these professionals with needed services.

Results

One hundred and forty surveys were returned with usable information, yielding a 21.9 percent return rate. Of these 140, 71 respondents were working in rural areas and 69 were not. Thus, the rural sample was 11.1 percent of the total number of mailed surveys. All results reported here are from the 71 rural respondents.

In terms of demographics, the rural respondents had been working as school psychologists for an average of 12.2 years and working in their current position an average of 9.6 years. Given that the target population for the survey included alumni of WIU's school psychology training program who were working as school psychologists in Illinois, it is not surprising that slightly more than one-quarter of the surveys returned (26.4 percent) were from graduates of WIU. Also not surprising considering the rural location of WIU, alumni of this program constituted 40.8 percent of the rural respondents. Although many graduates from university training programs in rural Illinois (e.g., Eastern Illinois University and Illinois State University) find employment in larger urban areas, the reverse does not seem to be true. In fact, graduates of the three programs in the Chicago metropolitan area (Governors State University, Loyola University, and National Louis University) together contributed only 4.2 percent of the rural respondents. The distribution of respondents who were graduates from each of the eight state approved school psychology training programs and who were working in rural areas is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Training Program

University Training Program	*Percent Respondents*
Western Illinois University	40.8
Eastern Illinois University	15.5
Illinois State University	15.5
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville	11.3
Northern Illinois University	4.2
Loyola University of Chicago	2.8
Governors State University	1.4
National Louis University	0.0
Other (out-of state)	8.5

Source: School Psychologist Survey, 1999

The rural school psychologists serve an average of 1,620 students, practice in an average of 5.5 school buildings, and work for 2.2 school districts. Most (88.3 percent) are members of the ISPA, and about half (55 percent) are members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Those who are not members of ISPA or NASP were asked why not. The overwhelming response of those answering the question

(90.6 percent) was that the organizations are too expensive to join. A small number (15.6 percent) also noted that the organizations do not meet their professional needs.

Regarding professional meetings/conventions respondents had attended during 1999, the most popular meeting type was training at their own school district/special education cooperative. More than three-quarters (81.4 percent) had attended this type of meeting. About two-thirds of the respondents had attended the ISPA spring convention (68.6 percent) and/or local or regional school psychology inservice training (65.7 percent). A few had attended the ISPA fall meeting (18.6 percent) and/or training at a university (17.1 percent). The ISPA fall meeting differs from the spring convention in that it is a single presentation on a particular topic and lasts only one day. Relatively few of the respondents (5.7 percent) had attended the 1999 NASP convention in Las Vegas.

Respondents who had not attended any professional meetings or conventions during 1999 were asked to give the primary reason. Half of those replying (50 percent) indicated that they did not attend because of personal reasons (e.g., family commitments, illness). A third of the respondents (33.3 percent) indicated it was because nothing sounded interesting, and a few (16.7 percent) did not attend because they could not afford to take time away from the job.

In order to examine the degree to which rural school psychologists are professionally isolated, they were asked how often they have face-to-face, computer, or phone contact with at least one other school psychologist. Two thirds of rural respondents have face-to-face contact with another school psychologist either every day (25.7 percent) or once a week (41.4 percent). Twenty percent have face-to-face contact every month, while 12.9 percent have contact a few times a year. None of the respondents checked the "almost never" response. In terms of computer or phone contact, more than half have contact with another school psychologists every day (8.5 percent) or every week (43.7 percent). Nearly a third (32.4 percent) have computer or phone contact every month, while 7 percent have this contact a few times a year, and 8.5 percent almost never have computer or phone contact with a colleague. Almost three-quarters of the respondents (72.1 percent) indicated interest in having more professional contacts with colleges, either in person or through the Internet.

The survey asked, "During the fall, what types of contacts did you have with at least one other school psychologist?" The majority of respondents attended a meeting with one or more school psychologists in attendance (98.6 percent), consulted a colleague regarding a question about a student (90.0 percent), talked on the phone with one or more colleagues (81.4 percent), got together with a school psychologist just to talk (71.4 percent), and/or collaborated with a colleague on a work-related project (55.7 percent). Fewer than half of the rural respondents had e-mail contact with one or more colleagues (42.9 percent), provided supervision to a colleague (25.7 percent), received supervision from a colleague (20.0 percent), or participated on a professional listserve (e.g., NASP) (14.3 percent).

In terms of computer availability, technical support, and computer skills, almost all of the respondents (97.2 percent) have access to a computer at work, while slightly fewer (87.1 percent) have access at home. Most respondents (89.9 percent) have support for using computers in the workplace. The most frequent type of technical support was a person who was able to help them with computer problems and questions (81.0 percent). Nearly half (44.4 percent) of the respondents also had opportunities to learn new programs through inservice workshops. **Table 2** shows the most frequent computer skills currently possessed by respondents.

Table 2. Respondents' Computer Skills

Skills	*Percent Response*
Word processing (ability to type reports and memos)	95.8
Ability to use a test scoring program	95.8
Ability to use e-mail at work or at home	83.1
Internet searching	83.1
Ability to use report writing programs	62.0
Ability to use databases/spreadsheets	32.4
Ability to use CD ROMs in searching for information	31.0
Ability to use a listserve	19.7
Ability to prepare and give talk using presentation program (e.g., Power Point)	18.3
Ability to use statistical programs	15.5

Source: School Psychologist Survey, 1999

In an attempt to learn under what conditions a rural school psychologist would use the Internet compared to usage of other nontechnological resources, they were asked the following: "If a child in your district were diagnosed with a disorder with which you were unfamiliar and that disorder had an impact on the child's educational performance, which of these would you be likely to do? (check all that apply)." Eighty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they would conduct an Internet search on the disorder. This compares with 85.9 percent who would check with parents or call a colleague, 81.7 percent who would check with the physician (with parents' permission), 66.2 percent who would check print resources (personal library or public library), and just under 10 percent (9.9 percent) who would call a university training program. Finally, although most would check the Internet first, only 5.6 percent would pose the question to a listserve.

In a similar vein, respondents were asked, "If a teacher asks you about a particular intervention strategy with which you're unfamiliar, which of these would you be likely to do? (check all that apply)." In the case of an unknown intervention, the most popular strategy would be to call a colleague (92.9 percent), followed by conduct an Internet search (82.9 percent), and check print resources (64.3 percent). Checking with the parents, calling a university training program, and

checking with the physician all garnered 18.6 percent, 18.6 percent, and 12.9 percent, respectively. Again, posing the question to a listserve was the least popular choice (8.6 percent).

Of those who responded to the question, "Do you have any favorite websites to check when you have a professional question?", 60.7 percent preferred NASP's website. ISPA's web site was preferred by 33.3 percent, and 32.1 percent checked the "other" category.

Finally, respondents were asked what computer skills they would like to know more about, in what format they would like to learn these skills, and what types of technical support they had available to them at work. Two-thirds of the respondents (66.7 percent) would like to know more about using listserves, nearly half (47.5 percent) would like to know how to use Power Point, and 40.7 percent want to know more about searching the Internet. One-quarter or fewer of respondents want to learn more about report writers (25.9 percent) and test scoring programs (16.9 percent). The preferred format for acquiring these included a local presentation ("in home district/co-op") (75.0 percent), through a pull out section in the ISPA newsletter (53.1 percent), reading a handout (45.3 percent), at a regional meeting (42.2 percent), at the ISPA spring convention (35.9 percent), or at the ISPA fall meeting (31.3 percent). No one wanted to learn these skills at a NASP convention.

Discussion

Results of the study show that most of the individuals working as school psychologists in rural Illinois attended school outside of Chicago. It also showed that most attend local or regional school psychology meetings and the spring convention of the ISPA; therefore, any training to be conducted would probably be most appropriate at the local/regional level or at the ISPA spring convention.

Professional isolation, at least among survey respondents, was less pronounced than expected based on previous articles on the practice of rural school psychology. Two-thirds of the rural school psychologists in the present sample have face-to-face contact with another school psychologist at least once a week and half have at least weekly contact with a colleague over the phone or via the computer. Still, nearly three quarters of the rural school psychologists responding to the survey indicated a desire to have additional professional contacts with colleagues either in person or via computer.

The vast majority have access to a computer at work and at home although the survey did not ask how many people share a single computer. Certainly, sharing a computer limits accessibility. Also, since the respondents serve an average of 5.5 schools (with a range of one to 27) having a computer in one place does not mean that there is a computer available at other places. Many school districts and cooperatives seem to be purchasing lap top computers for their school psychologists to address this difficulty. Additional information on types of computers, arrangements for sharing of computers, and similar types of data would be valuable.

The school psychologists responding to the survey indicated that they do possess basic computer skills: word processing, test scoring, sending and receiving e-mail, and report writing. Fewer than 20 percent, however, are able to use a listserve, prepare and present programs using Power Point, or use statistical programs. Also, only 15.2 percent are collecting any accountability data using technology. All of these would seem to be useful skills for school psychologists in rural areas to have. The use of listserves would seem particularly valuable since most of the participants rely on their computers to conduct Internet searches when they encounter a child with an unusual disorder or when they are asked about an unfamiliar intervention. Listserves can function as a means of contacting a large number of professional colleagues to ask for advice, information, and resources.

The results suggest further that either preparing for local presentations or writing out information for inclusion as handouts in the ISPA newsletter would be the best way to provide rural school psychologists with the information they need and want about technology. It may be that a combination of methods—for example, demonstrating Power Point in local meetings but preparing handouts on using listserves or searching the Internet—may be the most effective way of reaching the largest number of school psychologists.

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